

Medievalists often complain that the rest of academe pays little attention to the Middle Ages or to medievalists' scholarship. Departmental offerings at smaller institutions sometimes begin only with the Renaissance and when sessions on the Middle Ages are included at conferences, they are attended almost exclusively by other medievalists. Beginning with the troubadours and ending with *Seinfeld*, Anne Callahan's *Writing the Voice of Pleasure: Heterosexuality Without Women* is welcome for its recognition of medieval literature's significance for understanding the present. Medievalists will be disappointed, however, to find that feminist scholarship on medieval literature is virtually absent.

Callahan's is a two-fold project. First, Callahan wants to demonstrate an enduring literary tradition of what she calls "the troubadour effect." The heterosexual couple seems to be the norm in literary romance narratives, but a closer look reveals that the woman is only a writing effect created by a male writer to express self-difference: "The romantic lovers of literature, whose couple names are as well known today as they were at the time of their creation, sprang from the split of the single subject of poetry into himself--as the romantic lover--and a lady who for the most part is named, or simply called *domna* (lady)." (53) Second, Callahan traces the consequence of the troubadour effect for women who have wanted to write. She coins the term "vagabondage" to explain the dilemma for the woman writer who is forced to shift between the masculine subject position of writer and the feminine object of desire.

Medievalists will mostly agree with Callahan's conclusions about the masculine logic behind the allegedly female "domna" and the marginalization of the female voice from narratives that privilege homosocial bonds, but the scholarship on medieval literature that she uses is outdated or neglects some of the more sophisticated analyses of gender in medieval texts. Chapter 1, for example, "Occitania: The Culture of Love," asserts that a key feature of troubadour poetry was sexual abstinence and that *fin'amors* was always adulterous, two notions that have been contested if not discounted. The chapter focuses heavily on the work of René Nelli—so much so that Nelli receives more attention than the troubadours themselves—and Callahan appears to be unaware of the fundamental contributions made by such scholars as Sarah Kay, Simon Gaunt, Jane Burns, and Roberta Krueger. In addition, Callahan oddly chose to provide modern French translations rather than the Old French original alongside the English translations for Chrétien de Troyes and Marie de France.

"Vagabondage in the Age of Chivalry" examines how Marie de France, the *trobairitz*, Marguerite de Navarre, Louise Labé, and Madame de Lafayette struggled to become writers in a tradition of romance narrative that made the writing position equivalent to the desiring male subject. Again the argument, although credible, lacks attention to subtler detail and uses outdated material (like Bogin's edition of the *trobairitz*). Moreover, Callahan has a tendency to

flatten medieval poetic discourse, as when she quotes from the epilogue to Boccaccio's *Decameron* as evidence that the author believed women are incapable of lengthy discourse, a reading that obscures not only the playfulness of both the epilogue and the work as a whole, but also the simple fact that women tell some of the longest tales in the work. Later in the chapter, Callahan suggests that courtly love in the medieval "age of chivalry" was taken seriously, in contrast to the sixteenth century, when it had become merely a hollow game: since now "all of the men have learned to model themselves on Tristan, how does a woman distinguish between a vile seducer and a sincere lover?" (83) Many medieval texts, from conduct literature to Chaucer and Boccaccio, had already signaled the danger of women being deceived by beguiling wooing talk.

Continuing the book's chronological presentation, Chapter 3 moves ahead to Rousseau, whose romantic heroines, like the "domna," exist to serve the male author in his search for a unified self. The chapter then turns to George Sand's debt to Rousseau and the difficulty of her status as a woman writer. Unlike her male predecessor, she can not write a "confession," for a woman who takes on the position of the suffering and guilty one only reconfirms views of female baseness rather than elevating herself to the status of suffering artist. The "vagabondage" of the heroines of Sand's novels, torn between their status as love object and writer subject, is explored in the rest of the chapter and in Chapter 4, which includes a fascinating discussion of how Sand changed the ending of *Léila* in order to move away from the sexual desire of the romance plot to privilege the desire of writing.

Callahan begins Chapter 5 by examining plots that seemingly shift away from the heterosexual couple, either with the protagonist's ambiguous affections for the woman or with a more explicit homosexuality in twentieth-century works such as Gide's *L'immoraliste* and Mann's *Death in Venice*. Despite this apparent shift, argues Callahan, the object of writing is still figured as feminine. She then focuses on Virginia Woolf and Colette, whose works seem to challenge the logic of the patriarchal signifying system, but depressingly end up being in bondage to it. The heroine of Colette's *Vagabonde*, although forsaking romance to pursue writing, ends up in solitude, sexually isolated. Similarly, although Woolf's *Orlando* ostensibly ends happily in marriage, the sexual dimension of the heterosexual relation fades as the parting image of the lover is poeticized into the "she" of poetry. Like other chapters, this chapter includes a diverse array of material that could have benefited from subheadings to make the argument clearer.

The last chapter begins with a discussion of the cross-dressing protagonists of films like *Some Like it Hot* and *Tootsie*, who turn out to be more attractive and sympathetic women than the "real women" characters. The chapter then examines homosexuality in films such as *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, *The Crying Game*, and *M. Butterfly*, where the "perfect woman" yet again turns out to be a man. Callahan concludes by arguing that the situation comedy *Seinfeld*, commonly thought to have a gay subtext, actually demonstrates that the very notion of heterosexuality in the romance narrative is a myth.

The book covers an impressive range of material that effectively documents the tenacious occlusion of female subjectivity in Western literature. Unfortunately, by ignoring the valuable work of feminist medievalists who have already drawn on much of the same poststructuralist and psychoanalytic theory in pursuit of similar questions pertaining to the female voice and the vexed status of female authorship, Callahan's first two chapters have essentially reinvented the wheel. The subsequent chapters, although repetitive, are worth looking at for a sense of connections to other literary periods, and the last chapter offers territory to be mined for teaching. Undergraduates are often unwilling to admit that the misogyny of medieval culture can persist into the present age: the examples from television and film that Callahan discusses help to demonstrate otherwise.

— Lisa Perfetti, Muhlenberg College

---

**Caviness, Madeline. *Visualizing Women in the Middle Ages. Sight, Spectacle and Scopic Economy*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001. Pp. 232.**

---

Caviness's opening – "Prelude: The Problem with Mary: disembodied motherhood" – sets out the essential problem she addresses in *Visualizing Women in the Middle Ages*: the eroticized body. Medieval clerics' response to potential erotic connotations of the Blessed Virgin was to disembody her, controlling her by translating her into metaphors, but this strategy would not do for "regular" women. The feminist aim of the 1960s, to make women visible, was a double-edged sword because women have always been viewed, but as objects, not subjects, nor have women been allowed to be viewers. Caviness juxtaposes medieval and modern visualizations of women to establish the continuity of the objectifying gaze from medieval to modern times.

Caviness intends to show "that not only have images been used to construct the female body as an object of view, by manipulating its viewing community, but they have also at times been subverted, chiefly by women artists, to block that kind of objectification." "Visualizing" women has the multiple meanings of being portrayed, theorized, and made manifest. Freud, Lacan, and Mulvey are the major theorists who inform Caviness's critical readings in three case studies that represent the different categories of visualization – "Sight, Spectacle and Scopic Economy" – of the book's subtitle: "Sight," woman's transgressive looking; "Spectacle," the woman being looked at; and "Scopic Economy," the female reappropriation of the enterprise.

The term "scopic economy" refers to the powers and pleasures of seeing another person as an erotic object. Caviness acknowledges the Freudian concepts of penis envy and fear of castration, but then turns to Linda Mulvey's modern gaze theory, expressed in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, to counter them. Viewing women, as the theory goes, generates fear leaving the male two choices: to overvalue or undervalue women. Caviness takes the general ideas of this theory while nuancing it by introducing the problem of essentialism: is the aggressive gaze always masculine? Is the female gaze always punished?